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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a study that examined the transition services of individualized education programs (IEPs) for high school students with special needs. The Program Evaluation for Procedural and Substantive Efficacy of Transition Services was used to analyze 282 IEPs in terms of procedural compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, substantive content of goals and objectives written, and congruence between present level of performance statements and types of annual goals written. Results were analyzed across special education classification and school district size. No significant differences were found for school district size. Overall compliance varied by the types of items examined. Additionally, the number and type of annual goals written and number of short-term objectives met varied depending on the student's special education classification. More academic and transition goals were written than behavioral and other goals for students in all special education categories. Students with learning and emotional disabilities tended to have more academic goals written for them than any other type. Students with educable mental disabilities and low incidence disabilities tended to have the most transition goals written. Overall, IEPs had several problems with congruence. A summary of methodology procedures is appended. (Contains 13 references.) (CR)

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Abstract

Students with disabilities often experience more under- and unemployment and less success in living independently after leaving high school than students without disabilities. Additionally, the amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1997 strengthened the mandates for schools to provide transition services for students ages 14 and older. The present study was adapted from a study conducted by Smith (1989). The purpose of the present study was to examine the transition services of individualized education programs for high school students with special needs. The PEPSE-T was used to analyze IEPs in terms of procedural compliance with IDEA 1997, substantive content of goals and objectives written, and congruence between present level of performance statements and types of annual goals written. Results were analyzed across special education classification (i.e., learning disability, emotional disability, educable mental disability, and low incidence disabilities) and school district size (i.e., urban and rural). No significant differences were found for school district size. Overall compliance varied by the types of items examined. Additionally, number and type of annual goals written and number of short-term objectives met varied depending on the student's special education classification. Overall, IEPs had several problems with congruence. These results as well as implications for educational practice are discussed.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this study would not have been possible without the participation of Project SIGHT and the school districts that allowed access to IEPs for data collection. Thank you for your assistance with this project.

Analysis of Transition Services of Individualized Education Programs
for High School Students with Special Needs

Introduction

Students with disabilities often experience more under- and unemployment and less success in living independently after leaving high school than students without disabilities. Special education provides a means for schools to ensure students with disabilities are adequately prepared for the world once they leave school. Additionally, the amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1997 strengthened the mandates for schools to provide transition services for students ages 14 and older. IDEA 1997 defined transition services as:

> "a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation" (20 U.S.C. 1401 (19)).

IDEA 1997 also emphasizes the importance of the input of students in planning their own transition programs. Each student's IEP is required to include a statement of his/her preferences and interests. Hughes et al. (1997) include identifying a student's preferences and choices as one of the critical support strategies for effective transition services and suggest that this can be accomplished through observations, interviews, or assessments administered to the student or family members.

Unfortunately, the research conducted on the effectiveness of IEPs and transition services has not been promising and suggests that IEPs are not implemented as intended by the law (Smith, 1989; Stowitschek & Kelso, 1989). Reportedly, this occurs for many reasons including differing interpretations of the law, perceived lack of relevance to educational instruction, and lack of preparation and support of teachers to implement individualized planning and instruction. In regards to the effectiveness of transition services, Stodden and Leake (1994) suggested that the problem with effectiveness is partially due to the "adding on" policy of educators. Transition services need to be perceived as relevant and feasible. Plans need to demonstrate accountability and quality of services and those who implement transition plans need to be prepared and knowledgeable in the area of transition.

While there is currently not a definition for one type of effective transition program, several components have been identified by the literature as supporting best practice in the development and implementation of transition services, including individualized planning, student self-determination (Wehmeyer, 1994; Wehmeyer & Lawrence, 1995; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998), and family involvement (Guy, et al., 1997; Salembier & Furney, 1997). An integrated curriculum is also important. Levinson (1995) identified the need to develop a "functional curriculum" in order to integrate the identified goals of the student with the demands of adult life. The functional curriculum is developed based on the measurable annual goals and short-term objectives written for the student. Ideally, students receive instruction that allows them to apply these skills in real life situations. Therefore, instruction is linked to community experience and the workplace so that students are able to apply the skills learned in school to job

skills. The functional curriculum addresses the need for students to be able to generalize skills learned in school to their work and living after high school (Levinson, 1995).

In order to develop a successful transition program, Collet-Klingenberg (1998) suggests that schools must consider the important aspects of planning, implementation, and follow-up. Planning involves setting clear expectations and goals, following legal mandates, and including families, students, and appropriate community agencies in the development of transition programs. Once a transition plan is developed, it is important to implement the plan successfully. This includes assessment of career options, relating instruction in the classroom to work and community experiences, and providing individualized instruction. Finally, follow-up is important to ensuring a smooth transition from school to the adult world. This includes having connections with community and adult agencies and evaluating the effectiveness of current transition programs and modifying them when necessary.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine the transition services of individualized education programs for high school students with special needs in regards to procedural compliance with IDEA 1997, substantive content of goals and objectives written, and congruence between present level of performance statements and types of annual goals written. Procedures and the design of the current study were based on an earlier study conducted by Smith (1989). Results were analyzed across special education classification (i.e., learning disability, emotional disability, educable mental disability, and low incidence disabilities) and school district size (i.e., urban/urban fringe and non-urban/rural).

Research Questions

Several research questions guided the investigation:

1. Are there procedural compliance differences in IEPs between:

    a. special education classification?

    b. school district size?

2. Are there differences in the number and content of annual goals written and benchmarks or short-term objectives met in the IEPs for students between:

    a. special education classification?

    b. school district size?

3. Are there differences in congruence in IEPs for students between:

    a. special education classification?

    b. school district size?

4. Are there statistically significant interactions between students' special education classification and size of school district for:

    a. procedural compliance?

    b. number and content of annual goals written and benchmarks or short-term objectives met?

    c. congruence?

Procedures

In the current study, transition services of individualized education programs of high school students placed in special education in urban and rural school districts were examined in order to obtain a measure of current transition practices. Data were collected through the use of the Program Evaluation for Procedural and Substantive Efficacy of

Transition Services (PEPSE-T), adapted from the PEPSE (Smith, 1987). The PEPSE-T was designed to assess (1) IEP procedural components mandated by IDEA 1997, (2) IEP content (e.g., number and type of goals and short-term objectives written and met), and (3) congruency of the student's assessed needs with the written IEP goals and short-term objectives. A summary of methodology procedures used in the present investigation is outlined in Appendix A.

Findings and Discussion

While it was hypothesized that urban districts may have an advantage in delivering transition services due to better availability of community resources and personnel, no significant differences were found between urban and rural districts in regards to the ways that transition services appear to be delivered as indicated in students' IEPs. This may have occurred for a variety of reasons. First, the results of the current study indicated that linkages to community agencies were lacking for all school districts, regardless of size. Therefore, it may be that urban districts are not utilizing the resources available to them. On the other hand, it may be that rural districts have resources available to them outside of their district and are collaborating with nearby districts so that all can benefit from the same resources. Another explanation may be that rural districts compensate well by utilizing the personnel they have and pooling resources with adjoining school districts. For example, many rural districts did not have individuals employed in their school districts with job titles such as "job coach" or "transition coordinator", while urban districts had individuals with these titles attending IEP meetings. However, in rural districts, other individuals (e.g., guidance counselors or special education teachers) may take care of these responsibilities.

Procedural Compliance. No statistically significant differences were found for special education classification or school district size in the area of procedural compliance. Therefore, school districts were equally compliant with IDEA 1997 regardless of their size and the special education classification of the student. School districts were fairly compliant with IDEA 1997; although, no single IEP was 100% compliant. Out of 35 items measuring procedural compliance, school districts were 80 to 100 percent compliant on 14 of the items and 50 to 79 percent compliant on 15 items. Items that demonstrated less compliance across districts were items that were not clearly defined in IDEA 1997. For example, IEPs often do not clearly define how annual goals and short-term objectives will be measured.

School districts consistently identified needs for transition services on the IEP. Eighty-four percent of IEPs indicated that students had instruction needs, 63 percent indicated students had needs in community experiences, and 73 percent indicated that students had needs in employment and other post school living objectives. However, it was difficult to determine the extent of each school's connections with community agencies and this is most likely an area in which school districts need to improve. Only 30 percent of the IEPs reviewed included any demonstration of a connection with a community agency. With social skills being an important factor in an individual's ability to keep a job, it would seem important to give students experiences that would require them to practice such skills within the community. However, in order to do so, schools need to coordinate with outside agencies and this is most likely difficult. It will be important for districts to examine how they fulfill this aspect of transition services and

future research may utilize other procedures for more accurately identifying the current practices of school districts in this area.

School districts included statements of students' interests and preferences (i.e., 73 percent of the IEPs reviewed included this statement); however, only 30 percent of the IEPs included the student's signature. This is an interesting finding to examine in light of the current emphasis on student self-determination. It was not clear from the results of the present study whether students were not invited or whether students were choosing not to attend their meetings. If students were choosing not to attend their IEP meetings, future research will need to examine why this is the case and what can be done to increase attendance. The literature reports that student involvement in their IEP meetings increases motivation to perform in the classroom (Wehmeyer & Lawrence, 1995). Child development tells us that adolescents do not tend to see the relevance of what they do in the present to future well being. This perceived lack of relevance may inhibit adolescents from wanting to attend their IEP meetings because they do not see these meetings as relevant. Schools may be meeting compliance standards by inviting students to the IEP meeting; however, the students may choose not to attend. This poses a different challenge to educators rather than simply requiring an increase in compliance. Instead, this challenges educators to find ways to get students interested in planning and taking leadership roles in their own IEP meetings. One way to do this may be to make IEPs more relevant and linked to "real life." This suggests that IEP team members need to write goals and objectives that can be better measured and include activities from which students can gain experience and skills in the community. Additionally, student attendance may correlate with family involvement. That is, if families do not find relevance and

importance in the IEP process, the likelihood that students will view IEP meetings as relevant and important most likely decreases.

Substantive Content: Number and Content of Annual Goals Written. Types of annual goals were divided into four categories (i.e., academic, behavioral, transition services, and other) and examined. Students with emotional disabilities had the lowest number of annual goals written for them, while students with low incidence disabilities had the highest number of annual goals written. Students with low incidence disabilities (TMD, PMD, and Autism) had significantly more annual goals written than did students with emotional disabilities or learning disabilities. Additionally, students with educable mental disabilities had significantly more annual goals written than did students with emotional disabilities. One reason for this may be that students with low incidence and educable mental disabilities may be more likely placed in self-contained classrooms and it may be that students in self-contained classes tend to have more goals written for them than do students in resource and other special education models.

Overall, very few annual goals were written for students for each type (i.e., on average, one or less goal was written per student for each goal type). More academic and transition goals were written than behavior and other goals for students in all special education classifications reviewed. Additionally, students with learning and emotional disabilities tended to have more academic goals written for them than any other type. Students with educable mental disabilities and low incidence disabilities tended to have the most transition goals written. While students with emotional disabilities tend to have the most behavior goals written when compared to other special education classifications, their IEPs still included very few behavior goals (i.e., IEPs of students with emotional

disabilities averaged less than one behavior goal). One reason for the low number of behavior goals may be that behavior needs are addressed through transition or academic goals rather than addressed as goals identified as targeting behavior. In addition, behavior needs may be addressed through short-term objectives rather than through an annual goal.

The differences between special education classification in number and content of annual goals and short-term objectives met were interesting to consider. Overall, differences that were found were consistent with prior hypotheses. For example, we would expect that the IEPs of students with learning disabilities would focus on the academic deficits these students have in the types of annual goals that are written for them, while students with emotional disabilities would tend to have more behavior goals than any other special education classification. Furthermore, students with mental disabilities tend to have goals that led to living independently and, therefore, fit nicely into transition programming. While students with learning and emotional disabilities are expected to have at least average cognitive functioning, they may also be expected to more easily fit into the community after high school when compared to students with mental disabilities; therefore, there is less emphasis on goals and objectives dedicated to independent living. Students with mental disabilities may also tend to be on certificate or occupational diploma tracks that focus on vocational skills and transitioning into the community. These programs may also lend themselves to congruence of needs and goals as well as monitoring the goals set for the students.

Substantive Content: Number of Benchmarks or Short-Term Objectives Met. No difference was found for the number of short-term objectives met between any special education classification or school district size. Therefore, equal numbers of short-term

objectives were met regardless of the student's special education classification or size of school district. Overall, very few short-term objectives were documented as being met. Thirty-nine percent of the IEPs did not contain any evidence that short-term objectives had been monitored at the preset intervals, even though the majority of the IEPs indicated that the objectives were to be monitored at least quarterly. Thirty-two percent contained evidence that some of the short-term objectives in the IEP had been monitored. This is most likely due to lack of documentation, rather than to the student not mastering skills identified on their IEPs; however, this conclusion must be interpreted with caution since, in many cases, the teacher copy of the IEP was not the copy reviewed for this investigation and this type of documentation may not be transferred to district copies of IEPs. However, this result is not surprising given previous literature that IEPs are not being utilized effectively in the classroom to guide instruction (Stodden & Leake, 1994; Stowitschek & Kelso, 1989). If IEPs are not guiding instruction there is not much relevance in monitoring progress on goals and objectives. Interestingly, in the current study, IEPs of students with low incidence disabilities tended to be monitored more than the IEPs of students with other disabilities; although the reason for this result in unclear.

Congruence. Congruence examined whether the present level of performance statements and the annual goals written in the IEPs matched. Data analysis of this area indicated that the IEPs for students with low incidence disabilities were more congruent than the IEPs of students with learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, or educable mental disabilities. There was no difference found in the congruence of IEPs for school district size. Interestingly, IEPs tended to lack present levels of performance statements

for transition services; however, IEPs often stated that students needed transition services and these needs were addressed in annual goals and short-term objectives.

While it is unclear why the results indicated that many IEPs lacked congruence, it leads to an interesting point. Overall, educational services for students in special education need to become more congruent. Present level of performance statements often come from psychological testing results. These reports often state the academic concerns, but not the behavioral or vocational concerns. Therefore, psychologists may need to re-examine the purpose of their reports and the skills assessed in their evaluations. Best practices state that assessment should link to interventions and that the IEPs should be guides for classroom instruction. If IEPs are not viewed as relevant guides to instruction, the writing of these documents may occur simply as a way to meet the mandates of the law rather than as documents to plan for transitioning students into the community. Furthermore, this conclusion once again may lead back to the need for more functional curricula. Functional curricula may better lend themselves to congruency on IEPs because present level of performance needs may be paired with goals and short-term objectives within the curricula.

Educational Implications of the Study

What do the results of the present investigation mean for the implementation of educational services within our schools? While there are still many unanswered questions as to differences of transition practices between districts and what components are necessary for exemplary transition programs, the present investigation suggests the need for districts to examine the following:

- The measurability of written annual goals and short-term objectives,

- Ways to make connections with community and adult service agencies and how to inform students and families about these agencies,
- The degree of family and student involvement in the IEP process and the development of IEP annual goals and short-term objectives,
- How to link the types and content of the annual goals and short-term objectives written to assessment procedures and to classroom instruction,
- How annual goals and short-term objectives will be monitored and documented,
- How to link annual goals and short-term objectives to the student's needs or present levels of performance.

In regards to the provision of transition services on a broader scale, the results of the present investigation support previous literature in the area of IEP effectiveness and transition programming. It seems relevant that educators will have to consider the following implications.

Restructuring Transition Services. There has long been a movement to restructure special education services so that educators can meet the intent of the law and provide effective services for students. In regards to transition services, this will most likely involve restructuring services to include transition services throughout the lifespan. IEPs will need to be viewed as "transition" IEPs (e.g., IEP/Ts) that have the ultimate goal of preparing the student for their lives after high school and in the community.

Restructuring Training Programs. In order to effectively deliver transition services, the proper knowledge of adult/community agencies and training in transition practices is warranted. Providers need to know what services they are expected to provide and have the resources available to them in order to provide the services. In the

future, training programs may need to consider how much emphasis they put on transition services and how to incorporate such an emphasis into their programs so that students gain exposure to the implementation of transition services prior to entering the workplace. In-service training may be one way to help professionals, who already have been trained, become more aware of the importance of transition services, the intent of legislature focusing on transition services, and the resources available to them to adequately provide transition services to their students.

Creating a Functional Curriculum. Schools will need to provide functional, integrated curricula to their students. The psychological testing needs to be relevant as starting points for writing IEPs and aid in the identification of student needs. In addition, the annual goals and objectives written for students should lead to the instruction in the classroom, be easy to monitor, and written in a way that educators can determine when and if a student has mastered that particular objective or goal.

Family Involvement and Student Self-Determination. Finally, we can increase relevance to students and families by providing opportunities for them to be involved in the planning, implementation, and follow-up of IEP/Ts. This will help increase the relevance of school to "real life" and give families and students the skills they need to deal effectively with community and adult agencies once students leave high school.

Summary

Transition services for high school students in special education are an important aspect in preparing them to become productive members of society. While transition services are a relatively new phenomenon, the ideas behind them have been aspects of education since at least the 1960's. However, the results of special education research

continue to document similar results. The literature reports that individualized education programs are typically not effective and transition services seem to be following the same course.

The results of the present investigation support previous literature that indicates that IEPs are not 100 percent compliant with legal mandates, nor do they demonstrate complete evidence of relevance, usability, or effectiveness as documents that guide instruction in the classroom. More functional, vocational-type programs tend to lend themselves to better linking of student needs and goals. In addition, IEPs written with functional curricula in mind may be more consistently monitored. However, further research on the efficacy of functional curricula programs needs to be conducted. The IEPs that were examined in this study did not document links of school-based activities to community agencies or work-based experiences. Additionally, students were not actively involved in the planning, development, or implementation of their own transition programs.

While federal and state guidelines are adequate to help structure and define aspects important in transition services, they are not sufficient to guarantee an effective program that prepares students for work and independent living in the community. Special educators must go beyond minimum requirements and utilize best practices in order to develop creative, effective programs that have long-lasting results for their students. Students in special education can be productive members of society and live independent lifestyles. It is up to special educators, families, future employers, and the students to work together to provide opportunities for students to learn self-advocacy skills, link

academics to real-life experiences, and collaborate with other agencies to fully utilize resources.

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Appendix A

Summary of Methodology Procedures

Phase I: Development of the PEPSE-T

1. The primary investigator developed the first draft of the PEPSE-T from the PEPSE, utilizing IDEA 1997 and focusing on transition services.
2. The first draft of the PEPSE-T was reviewed by 5 experts in IDEA 1997 and issues in transition services.
3. The primary investigator developed the final version of the PEPSE-T based on feedback received from the reviewers.

Phase II: Selection of Research Team and Training on the PEPSE-T

1. The primary investigator selected 2 graduate students in school psychology (Summer 1999) and 2 undergraduate students in psychology (Spring 2000) to serve as additional research team members to assist in data collection
2. Research team members were trained on the format and use of the PEPSE-T.
    a. The primary investigator communicated with the original author of the PEPSE.
    b. The primary investigator trained other team members on the content, format, and use of the PEPSE-T.
    c. Members of the research team practiced as a group on actual IEPs that were not included in the field test or study sample and discussed scoring procedures.

3. Members of the research team conducted a field test on a small sample of IEPs to collect preliminary reliability data.

Phase III: Selection of School Districts

1. The primary investigator obtained a list of school districts that were participants in the statewide systems change initiative from the project director of the initiative.
2. The list of school districts were divided into urban/urban fringe and non-urban/rural districts based on the classification criteria.
3. School districts were first contacted by phone explaining the study and inviting their participation. This phone call was followed with a letter requesting permission to participate in the study.
4. School districts that agreed to participate returned the permission form to the primary investigator.
5. December 1, 1998 data count numbers were obtained from the State Department of Education.

Phase IV: Selection of IEPs

1. The number of potential IEPs in each of the participating school districts were determined from the school district's data count.
2. The number of IEPs selected in each condition from each of the school districts was determined.
3. The starting point for selection in each one of the special education classification conditions from each of the school districts was randomly selected.
4. From the starting point in each school district, every ith IEP was selected. for a total of 282 IEPs.

Phase V: Data Collection

1. IEP forms from each of the school districts were reviewed by the research team so that members were familiar with the forms and to facilitate consistency in recording.
2. Members from the research team scheduled visits at each of the participating school districts.
3. Selected IEPs from each school district were assessed based on the PEPSE-T.
4. Data were entered for analysis.

Phase VI: Data Analysis

1. A quasi-experimental research design was utilized. No control group was used.
2. Univariate (e.g., statistical factorial analysis of variance) and descriptive (e.g., mean, standard deviation) statistics were used to test the hypotheses and analyze data for each section of the PEPSE-T.
    a. Procedural compliance - 2 x 4 factorial analysis of variance
    b. Substantive content - 2 x 4 x 4 factorial analysis of variance with repeated measures
    c. Congruence - 2 x 4 factorial analysis of variance; Chi-square analyses